

If You Can't Learn It From a Book, Why Are You Reading This?

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ABSTRACT

People management, an inexact science if ever there was one, is often thrust upon individuals as they move up the corporate ladder. With promotion comes added responsibility whether a person is ready for it or not. How is a person supposed to learn to manage other people? Seminars, and online courses, and books, Oh My! The choices are numerous and chances are that knowledge will be obtained. However, how did you learn to deal with missing data where none was expected? You experienced the frustration after your program produced erroneous results and you learned how to prepare for this situation the next time. Management is no different. Welcome to my observations from twenty-one years of managing SAS[®] programmers.

INTRODUCTION

"The common sense school doesn't give out diplomas so I'm no expert."¹ I believe the proceeding quote hits the proverbial nail on the head as to how the reader should view my credentials as the author. I do not hold any advanced degrees in personnel management or business administration. Many years ago the founder of a company I worked for gave his senior managers the book *The One Minute Manager*². After reading the book, I told him that I felt my time had been wasted reading something that was all common sense. He told me that in his experiences he found that many managers fail to take into account common sense and that was one of the reasons he gave us the book. The following pages are filled with my observations from managing people, my opinions on managing people, and my strategies for successfully managing people. The foundation of my management style has always been common sense.

I cannot stress enough that I am writing about my experiences. What worked for me will not necessarily translate into success for you; ergo, the title. Read this paper, digest it, and then see if any of these points will work for you. You will need to remember to consider, among other things, the following: your strengths, weaknesses and type of employee that you are; company atmosphere; staff currently working for you; amount of staff resourcing control you have; and whether or not your management options are limited to a very strictly defined job description.

One last thought before I tell you about a man named Jed who was a poor mountaineer. Ooops, wrong story. This is a paper on management, not necessarily on leadership, although you be the judge where the points fall if you so choose to categorize them. Yes, there is a difference between those two skills and they are not mutually inclusive or exclusive. Never make the mistake that just because you manage someone, you lead them.

BACKGROUND

What is my definition of Success? For thirteen years (1997-2010) I was the Director of the Statistical Programming department at a contract research organization (CRO) located in North Carolina's Research Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill) area. Companies that make up the pharmaceutical industry offer an extremely competitive marketplace for SAS programmers. Add to that fact that the Research Triangle is one of the top geographic locations in the United States for these companies, and you have a situation where SAS programmers are constantly being targeted by recruiters as well as their colleagues at other companies (those referral bonuses really add up).

In addition to managing the Statistical Programming department, I was a statistical programmer and a SAS programmer since 1985. In other words, I possessed the same set of skills that my programmers had and was very familiar with the same challenges they faced in their day-to-day work. My time was split between managing the department and programming with my programmers. Statistical programmers in a CRO find themselves doing complicated work with extremely tight deadlines on multiple concurrent projects. At times, controlled chaos would be an accurate description of the working environment. Bottom line, if you cannot provide a setting for the programmers to succeed, they will leave. The retention rate for my department during these thirteen years was 93.6%.

PRINCIPLES

The *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* defines principle as "a fundamental truth or proposition serving as the foundation for belief or action."³ In order to succeed at management, or many other business related skills for that matter, you must be flexible enough to adapt to ever changing scenarios and always be willing to try new tactics while discarding long-used ones. However, I believe you should have a minimum set of beliefs that remain intact no matter what situation you face. Sure, the edges of these principles may need trimming or other maintenance over the years but the refinements are only done to strengthen them.

HIRE SMARTER AND MORE SKILLED PEOPLE THAN YOURSELF

This principle is based on logic, assumes that you have the power to hire and fire, and might seem counter-intuitive to your successful advancement in the organization.

- If you are the smartest one in the group, who is doing the work which you, as their manager, are responsible for? Do you really want to have to have all the answers for the group? Being in charge does not imply superiority in skill nor in knowledge. You were put in a management position because someone thought you could succeed at the task. Would you rather try to accomplish this task with an intelligent and skilled team or a team made up of so-so talent?
- If the organization is forming a new group and wants you to head it up, you will probably be able to do some combination of selecting employees from within the organization, being told which employees will be in the new group, and hiring from outside the organization. This scenario gives you the best chance at achieving your optimum group make-up at least initially. However, the more likely scenario is you being put in a position of managing established employees. In this scenario, the onus is on you to identify those individuals that you believe can both do the required tasks and also fit into the type of group that you want to manage.
- Don't ever be so insecure that you don't want people other than yourself to succeed. You are successful only if your group succeeds. Remember, your job is to manage the group so that it successfully completes its tasks on time and under budget. Do not worry about your boss recognizing individuals in your group for successes on the job. In fact, you should be making sure the successes of the people in your group are known to your boss. If you need to claim credit for the successes of others, you've missed what management is all about.

WHEN YOU ARE WRONG, ADMIT IT AND LEARN FROM IT

As a manager, any mistake you make may impact the people in your group, either directly or indirectly. It is your responsibility to recognize the mistake, take ownership of it, and do what you can to correct it. Your mistakes may force someone to work a lot of extra hours, may put some of your people in a bad light, or may have your group going in the wrong direction. We all make mistakes and the more stressful your job is the more opportunities there are for you to make them. Don't give your people an opportunity to see you try to weasel out of a screw-up.

OBSERVATIONS

These observations are based on what has worked and not worked for me and what I have observed about other managers in the places I have worked. While these observations may seem obvious, I repeat that I am surprised by how many people disregard common sense and not do the obvious in place of some grand scheme. Please note that not all employees fall into every observation. The order they are listed below does not convey any significance or importance.

DO NOT SPIN THE DATA

SAS programmers, as a rule, are great at looking at and understanding data. It is the foundation of what they do. Anything that is available for them to read in the company should be considered data, whether budgets, org charts, projections vs. actuals, announcements, task assignments, whatever. Good programmers are going to be able to understand the data. If you try to say or do things that are not consistent with the data, they will recognize that. Sometimes you do things that you believe are in the best interest of your group even though it is contrarian to the data. In those cases, you should be ready and willing to answer honestly the group's questions that will surely come your way. Someone who is good at understanding data can smell a spin and will treat it as such. Nothing is gained by spinning and chances are it makes you look foolish to those that you need buy-in from.

PATTERNS AND PUZZLES

This observation fits in well with the one about spinning the data. Two other foundations of good programming are recognizing patterns and solving puzzles. Yes, I know there are some people who come into work each day focused on the task at hand while remaining oblivious to anything around them. This observation does not really apply to them. The patterns I am talking about are not the ones the programmers are looking for in their programs. These patterns are in the everyday environment that they work in and apply to people within their own group (what time does someone usually get to work, who usually remains calm when things start to go awry, how does their manager – you – act in certain situations, etc.) as well as to the company (what information is regularly distributed to all employees, events before and after hirings and firings, the who and why of public recognition, etc.). Do not be fooled into thinking that there are no patterns at the office and that everything that happens is random and a reaction to the circumstances at any given time. People tend to act with a certain degree of predictability in the workplace. It doesn't matter if they're executive level or entry level.

The puzzle piece of this observation is when something doesn't fit a pattern. As I stated above, it is a programmer's nature to solve puzzles. The puzzle, in this case, is why something does not fit a pattern. When you, as a manager, do something different, your people will recognize that and wonder why if you do not make it obvious to them. Sometimes you do not want your people filling in the blanks with their own guesses. Remember, if you follow the principle of hiring smart people, then smart people will figure it out whether you want them to or not. This applies to you and your boss and your boss's boss, all the way to the top. Do not think that things can be hidden from smart people by not saying or doing something. Omission is as much a pattern deviation as doing something differently and it stands out.

COFFEE POTS AND COPIERS

If you drink coffee, make it if you are the first in the office or when you take the last cup. If you use the printer and copier, be sure to reload the paper tray when the supply runs out. Who are you to think these common courtesies do not apply to you? Little things do matter to most people and acting like you are entitled to others doing these tasks for you only provides your employees with another reason to not respect you.

BUDGETS

If you work somewhere that utilizes budgets and holds people accountable for adhering to them, make sure your employees are aware of the budget particulars and their responsibilities with respect to them. It is not enough that you tell people they must follow a budget. People need to know what actions they can use to try to live within a budget, what tools are available to them to monitor the actual numbers vs. the projections, who needs to be alerted when the numbers start looking bad, what are some early indicators of problems, and so forth and so on. This is not second nature to most people unless they have experience working with budgets in your company, yet this is the type of task that gets dropped on people. As a manager, know that you are responsible for identifying these tasks that are not easily learned and getting your people the training that they need to be successful at the task. Trust me, if your group does not live within their project budgets, you will be held accountable for it.

YOUR GROUP DOES WHAT AND WHO DO YOU WANT TO DO IT

You know what industry your company is in and you know what your group does within the company. What you need to do is recognize the skills and traits that are needed for someone to succeed as a member of your group and be happy while working in it. I've already told you that statistical programmers in a CRO find themselves doing complicated work with extremely tight deadlines on multiple concurrent projects. Some of the traits and characteristics shared by the people who succeed in this particular group include the following: very good base SAS and macro skills; a high tolerance for stress; a sense of humor; able to work independently as well as a member of a team; responsible; accountable; and small ego.

Can any qualified SAS programmer succeed as a statistical programmer in a CRO? No! Some need a lot of time to accomplish a task; some can only succeed if working on a singular task; some believe they are the smartest in the bunch and feel a need to tell everyone what they think. This observation is not about what makes great statistical programmers. Rather it is intended to show you that you need to consider more than just the base skill when building your group. Do you really want to hire someone you know is an excellent programmer but who has a reputation for destroying the team culture at past places? Maybe you do and maybe you don't. As manager of the group, you are in the best position to determine what is and is not important when it comes to the make-up of the people who work for you.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Everyone has them. Your job is to identify your peoples' strengths and weaknesses and use this knowledge to your group's advantage. Common sense says it is more efficient to maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses. Of course, it is not always advantageous to only use someone at their strengths. If you did this, the person becomes a liability if you need them to be equally adept at all tasks or if they are the only person who knows how to do something and is out of the office for a while. Resourcing can be one of a manager's most challenging tasks. It is not as simple as assigning names to projects based on required FTEs. What are a projects deliverables; what is the delivery schedule; what is the scope of work; has similar work been done before by your group; what are the competing priorities of the people you might assign to it? All these questions and more must be answered correctly by you every time you resource a project. It is imperative that you learn all you can about the people working for you. This knowledge will guide you as you allocate your group's resources and put your people in positions where they can succeed.

YOU'VE HAD THEM, I'VE HAD THEM

Almost every manager has had a boss or multiple bosses before they became a manager. In fact, chances are that you still have a boss. Having bosses is not a bad thing. I can argue that a person without a boss is less effective than

someone with a boss. Having to answer to someone is a great motivator for getting the job done right. A good boss is also a resource that you could use as a sounding board for your ideas.

A manager needs to take advantage of his or her own job history. What were the things that made your previous job roles enjoyable? Conversely, what were the things that made these roles painful? I know your previous managers did things that you swore you would never do if you were a manager. Well, now you are one so don't do those things. However, you might find that this 'thing' you swore you would never do is a necessity, so if you don't want to do it, you'll need to find an alternative solution. Kind of reminds you of the child → parent → child relationship, doesn't it? This previous experience is more important than some other management aids because you had a chance to evaluate it in practice instead of in theory. Do not be afraid to ask yourself how you would like to work for you. If you don't like the answer, ask yourself why and what can be done about it.

ENTITLEMENT-MINDED AND ONE SIZE FITS ONE SIZE

I'm going to quote from a blurb I read recently in the *Inside the Beltway* section of the *Washington Times*. 'As thousands of college graduates stroll toward the workplace, the nations employers must brace for a new crop of "entitlement-minded workers," says Paul Harvey, assistant professor of management at the University of New Hampshire. "Managers have reported a lot of problems associated with this. ... Basically, entitlement involves having an inflated view of oneself, and managers are finding that younger employees are often very resistant to anything that doesn't involve praise and rewards," he says.'⁴

Now I am not going to embrace a generalization of an entire group of people, especially since I have no direct experience with this latest group of college graduates. However, I have found that people I supervised, when grouped into different age categories 20-32, 33-45, 46-58, 59-70, are motivated by different things, expect different things, and learn in different ways. One size fits one person. A manager today has a difficult task when trying to figure out how to get the group to perform as needed. The age range for my department was early 20s to late 60s. Effective communication was not always as simple as presenting something one way. Some liked printouts, others liked e-mail or IM, others liked face-to-face, others liked books, and others liked presentations. Some were motivated by salary and bonuses, others by variety of tasks, while others wanted public recognition. Figuring all these pieces of the puzzle is a manager's job. I have wondered many times whether it was like this fifty years ago or did one size fit all. I'll repeat something I stated in the introduction; SAS programmers are a skilled group of people with many opportunities of employment. If you cannot give your employees what they are looking for while still maintaining a win for the company, they'll go somewhere else.

ROWE (DID NOT KNOW THEY HAD A NAME FOR IT)

Someone sent me a link the other month to a short presentation by a workplace motivational speaker. Now, as the title of this paper hints at, you probably know what I was thinking. However, I was stunned when he talked about the Results Only Working Environment (ROWE). He was describing the environment that I have always tried to create and foster for the people who worked for me. My folks have to accomplish difficult tasks under challenging scenarios. They do not need to be handicapped by having to jump through numerous hoops because someone thinks it is a good idea.

As a manager, it is in your best interest to hire adults. I do not define an adult by some arbitrary age or years of workplace experience. Rather, I needed people who could understand the given task, could do the task in the allotted timeframe, and would not embarrass themselves, the department, or the company. When you have people like that in your group, LET THEM DO THE JOB YOU HIRED THEM TO DO! There is no need for you to micro-manage them if the work is getting done correctly and on time. If you think there is a better way to accomplish something but you do not know if the company will go for it, try it on a small scale and prove that it works the way you intended and that it is scalable for the entire group.

Think about all the things that you would like to change in your department if you were given a free hand by the company leadership. Start trying to change some of those things within the company boundaries. I am not advocating outright insurrection. My guess is that you would be shown the door. However, you have a group to run and I don't think you want to be micro-managed either. Show some imagination and provide a better environment for your employees. Know that even if you prove that something works better for your group, the company may not go along with it. In that case, look for the next improvement. However, maybe your new way wins the day and your employees are grateful.

PETER PRINCIPLE

The Peter Principle states that in a hierarchy every employee rises to their own level of incompetence. This principle has taken on a negative connotation over the years to describe employees who cannot successfully perform their duties in a particular role. However, if you stop and think about it, there should be nothing negative about it. People make mistakes all the time and it is the very rare individual (I've never met him or her) that can accomplish every task

given to them. Given enough time at one place, chances are you're going to rise to some role in the organization that you are not a good fit for if you keep getting promoted. It is pure logic.

If you are a manager that oversees a large number of job positions, you will promote people who have done well in their current positions. They must be good employees otherwise why would you promote them. However, some of them will fail in their new roles. That doesn't turn them into bad employees all of sudden. It just means they were better suited at their old position. It is probably in your best interest to see if somehow you can get them back to doing what they were good at. This will take some skill on your part because you don't want the employee to lose face, so to speak, but you should expend the effort because it will help you and the employee.

SEE THE WHITEBOARD, BE THE WHITEBOARD

A whiteboard is great for plotting strategy to solve a complex problem. You write things on the board, review what is written, erase/modify/add as needed, and then go forward with a plan. There should be no reason that your employees don't look to you as a whiteboard. The key here is for you to listen and understand what the employee is seeking. Is it a sympathetic ear for a rant (similar to typing the e-mail but hitting delete before it is sent)? Are they having trouble with a piece of code and are hoping for your insight? Is it a personnel matter that they are unsure as to what to do? Is it a personal matter? One of the things that you should always be striving for is to earn your employees' trust. They should feel comfortable coming to discuss their issues with you. Listen and understand, don't listen and put your spin on what is being told to you. Ask relevant questions since one of your goals is to help your employees develop their own solution(s) to their issues.

Occasionally, some of these issues will have to do with their employment status: they want a raise and/or promotion; they're listening to some of the recruiting offers and either want your advice or see what can be done for them at the company; they want to switch departments within the company. Again, listening is your primary task. When you offer them your thoughts, be sure you don't preach and remember that you are sitting in a different position, both within the company and possibly in life, than they are. What may be important to you at this stage in your professional life may not mean much to them. Try to lay out all sides of the choices for them including identifying things that they may not have thought about due to a lack of knowledge or experience. If they are leaning towards leaving the company, be sure to advise them not to burn any bridges as they leave. People have no way of knowing who future bosses or co-workers will be so better to be remembered well.

LET IT GO OR HERODOTUS RULES

One of the most annoying and detrimental flaws I encounter in the workplace is when I'm in a group setting and someone brings up something from the past, even from years ago, about someone or something. All of a sudden, the here and now has been poisoned with information that 'may' have been relevant at some point in time but is no longer germane to the current discussion. On the other side of the equation is the old adage that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. I cannot tell you how to decide whether to retain and file away some piece of knowledge or just forget it completely. What I can tell you is that you must be able to figure out your own system for doing this.

A manager makes decisions for the group or participates in the making of corporate decisions every day. Are you going to keep someone off of a new project team because of a past incident: what was the incident; who were the participants; what was the person's experience level at the time? Are you going to increase the new bid on a project based on previous work experiences with this same client: does the client routinely wait until the last moment before requesting major revisions; will it be the same project team from your group and at the client site; is the work similar to something previously done for the client? You'll need to figure out these questions and more before you choose to bring in something from the past.

YOU'VE BEEN THERE

If a management role has been the only role you have ever held, this observation will not resonate with you. However, that does not mean you still can't learn something from it. For everyone who has been promoted to a manager, this one's for you. Remember what it was like for you in the trenches. What did you do when things were slow? What outlets did you use to keep your sanity when you were working those 65 hour weeks and more was being asked of you? You know what? Nothing has changed for your group. They still need to do those same things to get the job done.

Every time someone states that it must not be busy because they saw so and so playing spider solitaire, I just shake my head because they don't get it. The job that your group does is not making widgets. You're trying to keep people from burning out and/or quitting. Anyone who has ever worked with difficult tasks that require thinking knows that the answers are not always apparent and cannot be found by keeping at it without a break. How many times have you solved a programming problem on your drive home or in the grocery store? It is no different during the day. If you have people who are milking the system and playing games, do your job and fire them. The point of this is that you

need to defend your people and let them work as they need to. Programmers are scientists and cannot be pigeon-holed into working the same way.

CONCLUSION

If you learned something by reading this, I guess I chose the title poorly. If you read this because of the title, I guess I chose the title correctly. There is no singular answer to any issue a manager faces in the workplace. A manager cannot be afraid to try different approaches within the group and must be willing to accept the fact that sometimes these approaches are wrong and so, needs to either back-up and reassess or venture forth in a new direction.

As there is no singular answer to an issue, there is also no singular employee. Every employee that someone manages has their own quirks and idiosyncrasies. It is the manager's responsibility to figure out which ones to ignore, which ones to work with the employee on, which ones to have the employee deal with at a higher level, and which ones lead to the firing of the employee. The more you learn about each employee you manage, whether it is how long it takes them to do a particular task, which team members do they work better/worse with, are they comfortable in front of a client, etc., the more successful you will be in the resourcing of your employees. You can be a successful manager. The world is filled with them. If they can do it, so can you. Figure out what style works best for the people you manage.

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⁴Inside the Beltway. The Washington Times. May 18, 2010.

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I want to thank my bosses I've had over these many years of working for someone else. These folks have provided me with countless examples of styles and actions that I have tried to emulate where and when possible. Conversely, they have also provided me the opportunity to see the flip-side at times which has allowed me to build a management philosophy and style that tried to draw from the good while excluding what I perceived to be counter to getting the job done correctly.

Bosses are just part of the story. If I didn't have people to manage these years, I would have never known if any of what I tried would actually work or was only good in theory. I want to thank everyone who I have ever managed. You made this paper possible.

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